

# Tales of (Desmond) Tutu.

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I WRITE THIS in the midst of difficult and joyful task, preparing to present a longtime friend with an honorary degree. The joy is in the length of our friendship; the difficulty is in his fame. He is Desmond Tutu.

The grandeur of the occasion (my words will be translated into Latin!) rules out telling certain of my experiences with Desmond. So I thought I'd share them with a few close friends who read the Anglican Journal.

We all know about the 1984 Nobel Peace Prize. His heroism, saving a man being "necklaced," set on fire with a burning tire around his neck, was seen around the world. We watched his presidency of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, an enterprise utterly unlike either the war crimes procedures arising from brutality in Yugoslavia or the reprisals which followed genocide in Rwanda.

But the smaller human encounters over the years are just as great.

I remember a time in apartheid days, sitting next to Desmond at the Eucharist on retreat at Lambeth Palace. The celebrant solemnly read the epistle from Romans 13, "the powers that be are ordained of God." Desmond thought of P.W. Botha and F.W. deKlerk, gave a snort, and snickered throughout the whole epistle. I resolved never to sit by him again in public.

That same year, when we went to the Millennium of the Russian Orthodox Church, a Soviet journalist asked him why he laughed so much when his country produced so much pain for him. He said that he had two options, laughing or crying, and chose laughing.

I was told that respect for him in francophone Africa led some Catholics to nickname him "le pape noir," the black Pope.

The apartheid government tried so hard to stem his impact on the outside world, and invariably messed up. At the 1983 Vancouver Assembly of the World Council of Churches, they made two blunders. The first was to refuse him exit papers, so for two weeks he was the centre of attention, "Will he be able to come?" The second was to give him the papers, so that when he arrived you couldn't see him for flashbulbs. The media hung on every word.

And such words on that occasion! One, "The question is not, 'Am I my brother's keeper?' It is 'Am I my brother's brother?'" Another, "Liberation means that the oppressed are freed from being oppressed and the oppressors are freed from being oppressors."

But the government did better at vilifying him within South Africa. At the civic banquet following his installation as primate, I was seated with a Cape Town alderman and his wife, both staunchly anti-apartheid, but one told me that, so pervasive was the vicious media image of Desmond, she felt frightened when he approached our table.

At that installation, Archbishop Runcie preached a sermon which was reprinted in one of the papers. In the middle of it were dots (...) indicating an omission. To the delight of the crowd of thousands, Dr. Runcie had quoted Nelson Mandela. It was not permitted to print his name, let alone print any of his words.

In those days it was not uncommon, in Bishopscourt, the wealthy area named after the archbishop of Cape Town's residence, to see signs saying, "Hang Mandela." But on one retaining wall was written the words "I was an Anglican until I put Tu and Tu together." The propaganda even got to some church people.

But Desmond, as always, transcends vilification or glorification. And what a joy for me to be alongside him -- unless he starts snickering again.

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